Story, Storyteller and Storytelling

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Abstract

Nothing has had so much impact on our daily lives in the past two decades as the revolution in technologies of communication. Across this debate in industry and academia the notion of storytelling has come into prominence. It is a term in need for conceptual placement and theoretical framing.

Publishers may feel that they have first call on storytelling as primary producers of the written text. The dissemination of knowledge was until the electronic age largely by print. But since the invention and adoption of other media – film, radio, internet, web, book apps, interactive mobile media – storytelling has been the exclusive domain of none.

This paper provides a definition of story, storytelling and storyteller based on contemporary examples and historical usage, and traces how the affordances of new technologies have opened up pathways in storytelling by looking at examples from the origins of media convergence in the early twentieth century to today.

Keywords storytelling, story, apps, interactive fiction, orality, literacy, transmedia

Introduction

Nothing has had so much impact on our daily lives in the past two decades as the revolution in technologies of communication. Across this debate in industry and academia the notion of storytelling has come into prominence. It has become a common term in widespread use by writers, media producers, marketing and PR people and change managers.

Publishers may feel that they have first call on storytelling as primary producers of the written text. When oral traditions documented by scribes gave way to authorship of the written text, the dissemination of knowledge became by way of print (Roberts 2010, Gadd 2010). As media scholars have noted the printing press was the dominant means of distribution until the electronic age (Innis 1950, Williams 1965, McLuhan 1965). Nevertheless vestiges of orality remained in habits of reading aloud, private and public performance and in the electronic age, on radio, film and thence to online media. Knowledge has been accumulated, organised, verified, commodified and communicated by all these media. Print culture which was so dominant and remains so in the area of knowledge production, has shifted to accommodate these new modes of storytelling.

In this article I want to examine the application of the term, drawing parallels between its historical usage and contemporary appropriation. My fundamental premise is that storytelling changes as a cultural practice as the needs of that culture and society change. It is a folk art, driven by popular participation which surfaces particular concerns of the time, while also renewing the perennial of bonds of society. Each age uses the technologies to hand to retell its vital tales. I am aware that theorists from many disciplinary viewpoints have been drawn to notions of storytelling from Vladimir Propp and Christian Metz to the narratology versus ludology debate in the 1990s. In fact I am not looking at narrative – or the narrative component of storytelling – I am more concerned about the performative element in its definition and the performative effect of storytelling within society.

So my approach is simpler, to explore the common use of the term within its historical contextualization, comparing contemporary examples and past usage gleaned from archival research to identify key characteristics. In this I will pay particular attention to how it relates to the introduction of new kinds of media.

Story, Storytelling and Storyteller

Google's Book corpus is a data set which can be used to examine the frequency of a word, showing periods when a word gained common currency and times when it may have fallen into disuse because it has become stale, shifted register and/or meaning.

To start with the broad view of *story* using ngram charts which display the frequency of its occurrence as a proportion of the whole corpus, we can see that it was more commonly adopted in the 1920s than at any time up to the millennium (figure 1). Looking a little further into the phenomenon, the terms storytelling and storyteller were less often used but significantly *telling* trailed the *teller* until 1982-3 when *telling* became more commonly used (figure 2). The trajectory of divergence becomes significant from 1992 when storytelling becomes much more widely used.

Figure 1 Google ngrams results for *story* in British English

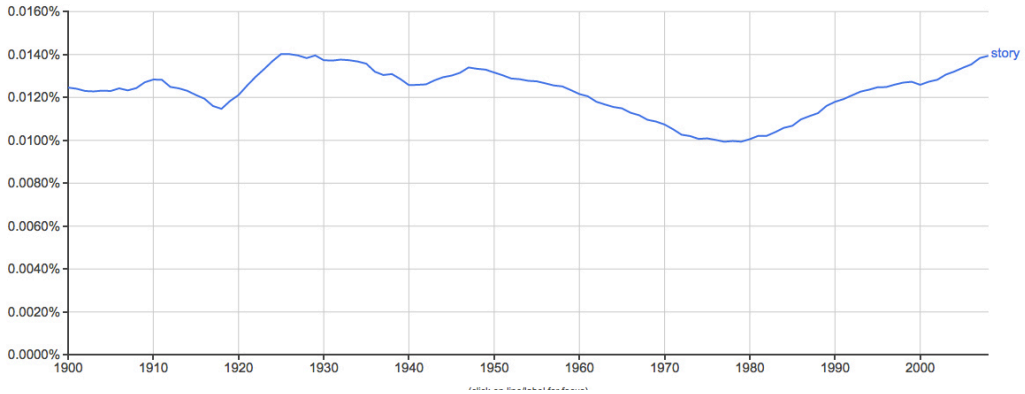
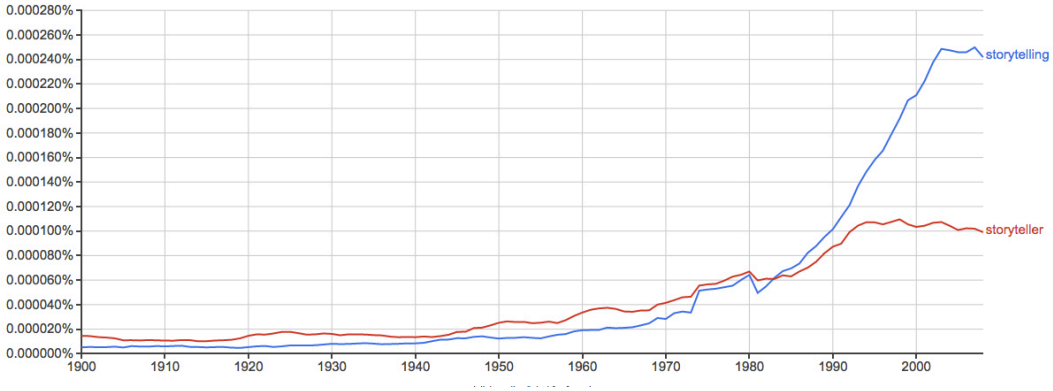


Figure 2 Google books ngrams results for *storytelling* and *storyteller* in British English



Looking into the Google texts,[2] it is clear in the 1920s as in the 1980s that storytelling is a concern of teachers and librarians and is discussed in the context of

children's upbringing: *Recreation* and *Children's Library Yearbook* as well as Arthur Burrell's *A Guide to Story Telling* (1926), Josephine Lawrence's *Man over the Moon Stories: Told over the Radio-Phone* (1922). In both decades Google brings up titles relating to folk tales and fables, ethnosocial studies from Breton villages to the Ilongot tribe as well as the expected great literary storytellers: Conrad, Dickens, Homer, Boccacio's *Decameron*. 'Storytellers' pulls up titles on people and their art: the written and traditional spoken words of Liam O'Flaherty, Lino Novás Calvo, and Janis Plavnieks, or the early visual storytelling of Lynd Ward, and film-making of Howard Hawks.

Triangulating the findings from Google with other databases the British Newspaper Archive shows an earlier and stronger rise in the use of the terms reaching back into the Victorian period. In the twentieth century the frequency of its occurrence was boosted by the publication of Cassell's magazine *The Story-teller* which published fiction every month from 1907 to 1937 (and advertised in the papers). Cross referencing with the Reading Experience Database we find the *teller*, but not *telling,* in the first half of the twentieth century. There is a record of a reader of the time exuberantly exclaiming it was 'a glorious age for the storyteller!' citing the works of H. G. Wells, Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, and the sea tales of W. W. Jacobs - all of whom had fiction published in *The Story-teller* or *The Strand Magazine* and their works made into films (Rose, 2001). Significantly, in amongst these Google titles, are works from the radio, films and experiments in collaborative storytelling which arose as storytellers embraced or resisted the new forms of media open to them (Weedon, 2007).

While storytelling has a longer history than I have presented here, we can trace the origins of many of the commercial and cultural practices recognisable today to the early twentieth century. Self-designated storytellers of this period, that is authors, playwrights, scriptwriters etc. who used the term about themselves, consciously made the distinction between storytelling as an activity and the medium. At this time we also see the rise of brands and trademarking begun by the adverting company James Walter Thompson Ltd. In the 1930s Napoleon Hill's study of Andrew Carnegie extended this to the notion of personal branding (Hill, 1937). Some authors such as Elinor Glyn embraced this new commercialism, endorsing beauty products as a means to keep their name and image in the media as well as an extra source of income (Barnett and Weedon, 2014). Thus there is a coincidence of timing between this observed rise in the frequency of the word *story* and the rise of brands. Today, of course, brand storytelling is recognised as a powerful technique in advertising to promote loyalty and forge a relationship with customers beyond the mere use-value of the product or service.

Storytelling in the 1920s extended from domestic or theatrical performance of oral recitation onto the new media of radio.[3] The record of the change is captured in the new radio listings column within the newspapers. Mass Observation and Reading Experience Database have evidence that the practice of reading aloud did not die out with silent reading but was continued as a separate social practice and etiquette manuals show that developing a good voice and delivery which held your audience in rapt concentration was a social skill to be perfected (Post 1922, Glyn 1916). With the advent of radio the intimacy of reading aloud in the family circle or the pub became something which could be accessed by strangers at greater distance. For Benedict Anderson this is part of the 'imagined community' arising from print capitalism, giving rise to national identities, though in my reading, the community, even at this stage, is more like a social network as individuals seek those with similar tastes (Anderson 1983). Detractors of radio pointed to changes in behaviour perceived to be dangerous and of digests of information delivered on air (Goodman 2010). For us these criticisms of 'fast' information or

communication with your remote social network while present in another gathering seem familiar.

In the new millennium the term retains its oral-folk origins but has mutated into different publishing sectors: in business storytelling shapes brands and is a tool for organisational change; in education and experiential learning it engages and transforms students; in law it analyses evidence and proof; in psychology it is the narration of our identity. Yet it is predominantly applied to the creativity of digital media: in radio, filmmaking, journalism, animation, visual media and creative and non-fiction writing, titles abound in describing the techniques of storytelling. In fiction it has been extended into the new media through IF (interactive fiction), book apps and game-books of various sorts. Vertical integration of media companies and digital convergence has enlarged the potential for storytelling. Now the use of the term has been extended into 'digital storytelling practice' and today the term is applied to transmedial and cross-medial storymaking linked to the globalisation of brands and the growth of franchises. For such brands the importance of story*telling* has overtaken the importance of the story*teller*. Like journalists threatened by the rise of citizen journalism, some designers have sought to reflect on what the professional designer can offer over and above the storygathering technology now makes easy (Lugmayr et al., 2017). In film, as Kathryn Millard pointed out in 2014 'studios increasingly purchase ...intellectual property in the form of television series, comics, books, games, blogs, graphic novels and toys. They buy up these for exploitation across a variety of platforms' (p.4). Nevertheless the author retains the important role of maintaining coherence: Millard adds, 'In this environment, a single high-profile author is seen as a guarantee of quality across the various elements of a transmedia project.' (2014: 179)

Storytelling changes as a cultural practice as the needs of our culture and society change. In 1995 Nicholas Negroponte told us that by *Being Digital* we could embrace communication across distance, time and through multiple channels and with infinite ability to recombine, remix and preserve the original. He wasn't entirely right – there is degradation even when duplicating a digital original – but the potential for the editing of diced digital information has lead to some calling the publishing function 'curatorial'. As we move into an age where the algorithms of AI take over the functions of selection and combination, preservation and maintenance, we find that writing, editing, publishing is far more than that. It requires the ability to listen to stories in society and predict markets. Algorithms can do this, but eventually they produce stale goods, so we value the revitalising human qualities of prehension, risk-taking and trust.

Storytelling, play and games

Walter Ong reminds us that storytellers do not have to be readers (Ong 1982). Orality has its own characteristics of aggregation, homostatis, redundancy. It is agonistic and concrete rather than abstract. Many of these qualities in stories have been lost through the dominance of print culture but new media forms of storytelling have invoked 'the large number of related existing literacies that can be identified in the digital age, such as news literacy, television literacy, film literacy, computer literacy, Internet literacy and digital literacy, as well as other emerging concepts like social media literacy' (Grizzle et al. 2013). For UNESCO a new literacy strategy is needed which harmonises and encapsulates all these. Print is only one of the dominant symbol systems of a culture and if there are to be new directions in print culture these need to reach into the complexity of the encoding systems within film, media, graphic and performing arts. Digital book

adaptations such as 80 Days (2014), Sorcery (2013), SENS (2016) are exploring the crossover into these systems - often taking the lead from games.

Arguably the best stories are those that you are 'lost' in. A deeply affecting story rolls round your mind, inhabits your waking hours until you can immerse yourself again in it. This is not to say you are uncritical, but you are emotionally engaged in the story. It is something like childhood sleep: heavy, deeply refreshing, purging, restorative, formative. This desire for immersion in the storyworld pervades discussions of the potential of a new technology from the early days of radio to 3D cinema and VR. With VR technology you can 'make someone feel like they have been teleported to a destination,' according to Patrick Milling Smith of Vrse.works a production company (Temperton 2015). Despite the hyperbole of the statement, I have to agree.[4] You are immersed, whether you are following the arrows in the line art VR storyworld of 'SENS', or riding the friendly beast in 'The Turning Forest' (2016), or in Liberia in the middle of the lived experience of a village's recovery from an Ebola outbreak as in 'Waves of Grace' (2015). Deep immersion or hyperfocus has been dubbed psychologically dangerous, as well as liberating and fulfilling, and VR does have this potential (Wilson and Soranzo 2015). However immersion in storytelling, although similar to Csíkszentmihályi's 'flow' (1990) in games in that it focuses concentration intently on the present moment and distorts the subjective experience of time, does not give the reader a sense of control over the event, nor require participation involving reflex physical action. Significantly, immersion in storytelling does not preclude an awareness of a mediums deitics. In fact a nuanced awareness of the distance between the reader and the characters through the grammar of the medium is essential to the appreciation of the story.

Our innate desire for stories and the psychological and social benefits of fiction have been the subject of scientific inquiry and experiment (László 2008, Oatley 2011, Hsu 2008 and many others). In childhood stories form the brain and neural paths, they are a way of making sense of and connecting disparate events. Our brain grows to recognise story patterns like facial recognition. Each generation learns *how* its society tells stories. The greatest impact of story is in imagining and experiencing life outside our everyday physicality. MRI scans have shown that when reading a story the activity shown in the brain corresponds with the activity shown if it were really happening. As Jonathan Gottschall argues in *The Storytelling Animal*, 'Reading is often seen as a passive act: we lie back and let writers pipe joy into our brains. But this is wrong. ... The writer is not … an all-powerful architect of reading experience. The writer guides the way we imagine but does not determine it' (2012 p. 4-5).

Arcadia, Iain Pears' 2015 multilinear fiction on a book app and published in hard back is a reflection on story, and on the traditions of orality. There are ten character storylines which you can follow, one is an author Prof Lytton who is drawn into the world he imagined and finds it had 'Taken a few pencilled jottings and extrapolated outwards, adding the details he had never bothered with' and 'had developed some huge crisis out of it all' (Pears 2015, Lytten listens). In the book the Storytellers have ossified the story, retelling it as truth, giving rise to accretions of rhetorical embellishment, citation and precedence, with fantastic achievements of memory and learning - but not inquiry. Lytton rebuffs them: 'I wish you to question not obey. Doubt, not trust. That is the purpose of the Story' (Pears 2015, Preliminary remarks).

In his review in *The Guardian* Stephen Poole says 'We live in an age in which storytelling is considered the highest possible literary virtue.' Yet according to Poole 'The valuing of storytelling above all else does risk the promotion of an 'infantalized literary taste' (Poole 2015). And he places *Arcadia* in the young-adult cross-over market

with Cornelia Funke's German trilogy *Inkheart*, *Inkspell* and *Inkdeath* (2003-8) and its 2008 movie adaptation directed by Iain Softley. In David Lindsay-Abaire's screen play the fable and its story characters takes on a "real" life through the power of the reader. As with Choose Your Own Adventure stories, interactive fictions and book-games, choice, role play, and play itself are somehow considered lesser and that playing a role to gain the attributes of the character – such as the hero, princess, superhero, or lover - is something we grow out of. It is often argued that this is because they only offer escapism as in a similar way adaptations of classics have been accused of a cheap emotionalism (Giddings and Sheen, 2000).

The issue for these psychologists is whether the emotion extends our compassion and understanding. Gottschall would argue that when playing, the child-protagonist is at the centre of the experience – as, Bruner and Lucariello cautions, we are in our own renarrations of ourselves – and that this does not promote empathy (Bruner and Lucariello 1989). This would define 'infantalized literary taste' not in aesthetic terms but in psychological. In such fictional worlds or game-play it is argued there is no assimilation of alternative roles, no empathy, and the world is built with artificial rules where in the real world there may not be any, or they may be unknown. Therefore 'play' is deemed an inauthentic story enacted from external pressures and conformity and, if without empathy, is unable to enlighten or improve emotional intelligence (Oatley 2011).

Nevertheless we are attracted to the emotions in stories as they offer the self emancipation and fulfilment (see James 1917, Damasio 2005). In his 1967 essay 'Cybernetics and Ghosts' Italo Calvino imagines a poetic-electronic machine along the lines of Turing's computer which can 'perform all the permutations possible on a given material' and play the 'combinatorial game' of the storyteller in his tales of figures and actions. Calvino imagined a machine that churns out stories applying Chomskian grammatical rules and recombining figures and actions from the Proppian analysis of folk tales and Jungian architypes. But he argues, the meaning of the story does not come from this machine. The 'poetic result will be the particular effect ... The shock that occurs only if the writing machine is surrounded by the hidden ghosts of the individual and of his society' or as he phrases it, an explosion into myth (p.20). With this Calvino locates the *affect* of Story within society.

Ong says homeostasis is a characteristic of oral storytelling, I suggest in comparing these two peaks in the historical occurrence of story that it blossoms in periods when new technologies of storytelling combine with social and cultural transformation. MacDonald points to the 1920s as a time when scriptwriting emerged as a distinct skill of visual storytelling separate from the writing of plays or novels (2008). This followed the 'chasm' of World War 1 which Clemence Dane said only young writers were able to bridge. Dane meant that only they were able to reject the past and seek to make sense of the shakeup of roles between men and women, older and younger generations, and redraw a national heritage (Dane 1932). Their new or renewed stories imbued with emotion sought to find meaning in the vicissitudes of individual and social lives. Over time stories that no longer connected to a psychological or social need because that need had been fulfilled or had gone, became stale or lost.

What is common in both periods is a rise of visual storytelling. The technology which facilitated this mediated the experience, making the act of storytelling distinct from the storyteller. This separation appears to go beyond a cultural shift from literacy to orality, or the fade out of the writerly and fade in to readerly texts. Storytelling has always been a folk art in its origins, and it is again as we all can tell stories on instagram,

snapchat, and facebook and though the multitude of apps for the mobile which allow the user to combine photos, audio, music and video (Aciman 2015). In storybots for children, these stories can be populated by cartoon characters and can have preset story arcs.

Drawing a historical comparison between the two period's adoption of new media, illustrates how deeply storytelling can affect and repair our society. [5] Today there are equivalent aspects of our changing society which feed into our modes of storytelling. The multimodal social roles we have leads to the fragmentation of forms of address. We have problematised the authenticity of the self on television and social media platforms and problematised our own provenance in the traces and trails of our digital identity. Media storytelling, particularly those offering a choice of protagonist, or alternative storylines reflect these realities. Yet in essence it remains the emotional connection that we feel to a story which gives it its ability to change and transform us. When we lose ourselves in a story in a book, through listening or in a cinema, and through the empathetic connection with the storyworld, we find we have a different apprehension of the world on our return. Of course this may or may not last, but this is why it is used in change management, politics, social science and other fields. Print culture has been successful in capturing and telling a compelling story at the right moment. Now however it needs to consider both the moment and the medium.

Biography

Alexis Weedon holds the UNESCO chair in New Media Forms of the Book at the University of Bedfordshire where she is a research professor in publishing. After a spell at Hobson's Publishing in the 80s and working with the University of Luton Press in the 90s, she became fascinated by the potential of digital convergence for the book and in 1995 co-founded *Convergence: The international journal of research into new media technologies* (SAGE) with Julia Knight. She is an authority on historical bibliometrics and published *Victorian Publishing* (2003). More recently she co-authored a study of the popular romantic author *Elinor Glyn* with Vincent L. Barnett (2014). She currently leads a research group exploring digital forms of storytelling and the book.

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[2] The methods of digital humanities are powerful and here the search provides multiple access points unavailable by other means. But the word search of a corpus brings up a mix of the trivial and the meaningful and there are many caveats to the interpretation of the data. The data is raw and there are issues about the uneven size of the corpus taken year by year. There are misdated books and redundancy as well the 'noise' of optical character recognition (OCR). So entering into texts and locating discourses in this way quite different. Where older analogue methods of accessing by indexing prioritized proper names (and authorship), and concepts which had been selected by gatekeepers – authors, indexers, editors – this is more rough and ready and such observations should be confirmed by other means.

[3] The Mass Observation Archive and the Reading Experience Database have evidence that the practice of reading aloud did not die out with silent reading but was continued as a separate social practice.

[4] The Network Effect aggregates from the net and google images, videos and word frequency, is situationalist anchoring audio video clips in the real world and demonstrates redundancy. It is however non-fiction. http://networkeffect.io/

[5] Employing Ian Hutchby's term, the 'affordance' of the material object or technology lies in its material constraints and use which is relational: radio is a technology without pictures. It relates to orality.